

FBU CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION ON ILL-HEALTH PENSIONS



The Union has called for urgent action on a change in guidance for recent amendments to the Firefighters Pension Scheme (FPS) that has already seen three firefighters in London denied a job and pension.

The Union accuses the then ODPM of misleading parliament - and stakeholders, including the FBU - on changes to the FPS regarding ill-health retirements and redeployment, and if the situation is not resolved the Union will be looking to ballot on industrial action.

The aim of the original change to the scheme (made in July 2004), as explained to stakeholders during the consultation, to parliament when legislation was laid before parliament and again in subsequent fire service circulars, was to allow greater flexibility into the scheme by allowing redeployment to non-operational duties if this was appropriate.

However, new guidance issued in September 2006 by the department of Communities and Local Government means a pension will not be paid even if no such job exists.

The new guidance impacts on all firefighters and the Union has had strong indications that anyone retired in the last 5-10 years will have pension reviewed.

Said General Secretary Matt Wrack in a letter to the minister:

“The effect of these changes will be to place firefighters in limbo. They will not be able to continue in their profession due to ill-

health. They will not be entitled to a pension. They will also not be guaranteed any employment since there are few, if any, such (non-operational) jobs in existence within the Fire and Rescue Service.

“Members who have paid a very high level of contribution (11%) to allow for the possibility of early retirement due to ill-health are now facing a future of poverty as a result of guidance issued by CLG.

Relatively easy resolution

“This matter could be resolved relatively easily by a revision of the CLG guidance and a return to the position which existed immediately following the change in 2004.”

The three London members were told by the brigade that their pension was being cut off in July 2007, as of August. When General Secretary Matt Wrack heard of the stopping of the three members pensions he immediately wrote to the capital's fire chief calling for the decision to be reversed.

Matt Wrack added: “The Union cannot accept that this is an appropriate way to treat former firefighters. “

No job, no pension, no money

One of the three, Martin Marrion, had been retired in January 2006 on medical grounds – due to degenerative hearing loss which was caused while attending incidents. The decision to retire Martin was a decision that he had opposed and when he was told his

pension was being stopped, Martin repeatedly contacted the brigade to get his job back – but to no avail.

Martin said: “I wanted to be a firefighter since I was six. I never wanted to do anything else. And I was a really good firefighter.

“I didn’t want to go. I was forced to go. And now they are not even paying my pension. It’s terrible. I’m 50 now. I took out a new mortgage two years ago. My plan was to retire at 55 and pay my mortgage off with my pension. I am in serious trouble now. I’ve already missed two payments on my mortgage.”

“It’s the first time I can’t provide for my family. I can’t describe how I feel. This has affected me very badly and I know it has affected my two colleagues badly too. I don’t think I’ll recover from this. I didn’t want to leave the job. It’s just unfair.”

“Absolute disgrace”

London regional secretary Joe McVeigh said the London Fire Brigade’s behaviour was an “absolute disgrace”.

“These men served the public of London with distinction and now the brigade wants to force them into poverty, and I do not use the word lightly.

“However, this is not just a London issue. If this brigade gets away with this, they and other authorities will be doing it to everybody else.”

The FBU Executive Council has drafted the following model resolution which has been sent to all branches for their consideration:

Resolution on Ill-health retirements within the Firefighters Pension Schemes

“The Fire Brigades Union condemns the decision to cease the payment of pension to three retired members of the FBU following a medical appeal. This act has placed these individuals in the position of being without a job and without a pension.

“This decision results from guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government in relation to the Firefighters Pensions Schemes which differs from that provided in 2004. This newer guidance means that members will not be retired if they are deemed able to fulfill any part of the duties within the role map – even if such a job does not exist. This will ultimately lead to large numbers of Firefighter being placed in the position of being unable to work because of ill-health or injury but unable to receive a pension. This is completely unacceptable.

“These pension schemes are designed to take account of the physical demands of work in the Fire and Rescue Service and as a result members of the scheme pay a contribution higher than is paid in most other similar schemes. Yet the new advice from the government will mean that it will become impossible to actually receive a medical retirement in virtually any circumstances.

“We call upon the Executive Council to prevail upon the Ministers within CLG to ensure that the current advice is amended in line with that originally provided in 2004. This should be a relatively simple step to take. If this is not done, we call upon the Executive Council to initiate a political campaign aimed at highlighting this disgrace and an industrial campaign aimed at bringing such an amendment into being. “

For more information, visit www.fbu.org.uk

Members with individual queries should contact their local official in the first instance.